



Sweet Afters



readtheselips volume three

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—readtheselips—

Volume Three

Sweet Afters

edited by
Evecho
and
Linda Lorenzo

June 2009

read
these
lips



Sweet Afters

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Sweet Afters: Read These Lips, Volume 3

Edited by Evecho and Linda Lorenzo

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Foreword

One of the best things about being the editor of *Read These Lips* is the opportunity to work with writers who come, not only from different countries, but also from a range of experience and creative approaches. To capitalize on those differences, we have not prescribed themes for our anthologies and are open to stories as varied as lesbians' lives.

This volume of *Read These Lips* presents another collection of distinctive stories from talented lesbian authors. Joan Nestle—co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and iconic lesbian activist—honoured us with a fascinating story of one lesbian's joyous life celebrated by those who shared it. Janis Spehr sent us a breathtaking narrative of a housewife struggling to escape a dead-end life. J.E. Knowles, Georgia Beers, JD Glass and Amy McDonald each gave a glimpse into the complexities of significant relationships. Vicki Stevenson reminded us that happy beginnings can happen anywhere, and poet Natasha Carthew offered three short but intense poems for all who have longed and loved. For the first time, we are featuring a photographic exhibit by JRen, who also shot this issue's beautiful covers.

All these contributors have generously entrusted us with their works. They understand that sharing stories is the privilege of the teller. Each reader will take an image, feel an impression, or perhaps breathe more easily and with a little more affirmation about her own life which, one day, we hope she will share with others.

The team at RTL—Linda, Renée and Ann—have created another fabulous anthology for you. *Sweet Afters* is about the last course, the indulgent pleasure afterwards. We hope this issue of *Read These Lips* satisfies in the best way.



Editor-in-Chief, June 2009.

For Carol, gratefully, lovingly.

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Where There's Smoke

J.E. KNOWLES

“WAKE UP. Come on, let's get out of here.” My lover tugs me to my feet. I can hear the fire alarm. It's coming from down the street, but as close as houses are built together in Amsterdam, it might as well be in our building. We make our way down the rickety spiral staircase and out the front door without exchanging any more words. There is smoke coming from several houses away, but the fire brigade is there too. We're not in danger. Probably some dumbass tourists overindulged in the liberal Dutch pot laws.

Our silence is familiar. Often we don't speak. The woman I love is not a big talker on any occasion, and though in the early years I felt compelled to fill the silences, gradually I've learned to cherish them. She is not like the women in many romantic stories, which she does not read. In fact, she doesn't read stories much at all, at least not those in which relationships feature prominently. If it were up to her, she would read only dead writers. She rarely talks during supper, and never during sex. We have, in short, almost nothing in common.

I want her all the time.

We have not come to Amsterdam to smoke in coffeehouses. My lover does not smoke and never has. She says lungs were not made to smoke anything. As in so many other matters, she's simultaneously right and a bit of a totalitarian about it. I'd like to think this is another thing we don't have in common, but I'm afraid we do.



We love Holland and its liberal laws. We love it because at this time, spring 2001, it is the only country in the world that treats its homosexual citizens exactly the same as its straight ones—no civil unions, no restrictions on adoption. Were we Dutch, we could get married here, stand for prime minister, anything. Soon this will be true in other countries as well, but right now it is true only in the Netherlands. This country where Anne Frank hid, and everyone rides bicycles along the canals, and it doesn't matter which religion they practice or which sex they presently are.

And, of course, this is the land of Heineken, the beer one can safely order anywhere in the world, sort of like a classy McDonald's. Heineken and homosexuality. With such an intoxicating combination, who needs drugs? I love it, my lover loves it, I love her...I have so many words. And she so few.

Homosexual, for instance. *The New York Times*, the Heineken of American newspapers, tiptoed into the use of the word *gay* about ten years ago. Why do my lover and I like *homosexual*, besides the fact we're both bent as forks? For one thing, a word ending in *sexual* puts the emphasis on sex. Where it belongs. If we're going to be defined by sex, might as well have a lot of it. Which is why we also like *lover*, a word that in the straight lexicon is all about sex.

But in Amsterdam there is another reason. If you go behind the Anne Frank House, along the Prinsengracht, you will find another thing unique to the Netherlands: the Homomonument. It is the only memorial in the world to the homosexuals who were persecuted and killed, along with so many other people, by the Nazis. Holland has set up a big pink triangle—the symbol the Nazis used to label



homosexuals. They had a label for everyone they hated, as people tend to do. My lover photographed me beside this monument. Being a woman of few words, she will not caption the photo, but if she did, the caption would read “Here stands a big fucking homosexual, alive in the twenty-first century.”

Fucking we also like. The word and the deed. In Holland, where everything is legal, mere fucking between two women who have loved each other is hardly a political act. Not long ago, where I come from, it was a felony. In many places it is still punishable by death. Perhaps the Homomonument is in Amsterdam because this is the only place where it is truly history.

Ours is a passionate relationship. In every sense of *passionate*, another word I love. When my lover and I disagree, which we do often, we shout. Or rather, I shout. I begin with talking, passionate pleas. She does not talk back, so I continue frantically, and more loudly. This strategy has never worked, yet I return to it, as if to rescue something from the burning building. Eventually, she will respond with shouting of her own, and then walk away. This is how we have conducted ourselves for years. Just this afternoon, in the Rijksmuseum, we went through the whole process again in front of a painting. My lover gets very angry around art. She finally shouted back at me and then stormed out of the museum. We saw each other again hours later, back at our flat up the rickety spiral stairs.

I never remember what these fights are about.

Somehow, though, we always find our way home. If our fighting is so routine that we could simply hit repeat on a recording of it and walk away, our reconciliation is improvised jazz. A music she's taught



me to love. When we come back, to our flat in a narrow canalside street in Amsterdam, we can't resist each other. We find our way home in bed.

Or couch. That's where we were this afternoon, making up for our loud, embarrassingly American argument in the Rijksmuseum. My lover guided me on top and I felt myself slick against her incredibly tight abdominals. Lots of women, and men, crave abs like these (for themselves or their lover); what they may not realize is how much sensation can be created by these muscles when they are active. I ride her till I come and she doesn't have to touch me with anything else. Or say a word.

So little is said. There are all these things that really should be talked about at the start of a relationship, things which, if they aren't established in the beginning, like the book of Genesis, will only come down later in a flood of tears, or possibly destruction by fire. Such as whether or not we can talk, at all, about anything important between us. But like so many couples before, we blunder on, unaware perhaps even of our own feelings, never mind each other's. This is no doubt the source of our tape loop of fruitless fights.

And our continuing attraction. We are, after all, an enduring mystery. Sometimes I think I know my lover only marginally better than I did when I met her, still a teenager. To fling ourselves into lifelong commitment, at that age and in such a state of ignorance, was the height of foolishness. A crazy, impetuous, impossible thing.

I have never been sorry.



My lover is endlessly creative. At the breakfast table, over Dutch coffee and rolls, she stroked my bare feet with hers in a way she knows feels like fucking to me. This is the type of thing she must be thinking up, all those times she's silent. If I asked her, she would never be able to say. That I won't ask is just a limitation of mine. Perhaps that's what a relationship is: a way of bumping into our own limits, and learning what they are.

I think these unromantic thoughts now, while the firefighters work, my lover is silent, and I am back to imagining what may or may not be going on with us. A conversation she is loath to have. I do not think when I'm on top of her or, less often, she on top of me, when she surprises me with her inventiveness and her skill. Occasionally there are other surprises. She will bring something home...flowers. Other things.

I never have to act surprised.

But now, at 3 a.m., she squeezes my hand, something she rarely does on the street. "Looks like they've got it under control." Control is very important. Control means she can relax, and so can I.

Soon 2001 will be over. The world will never be the same. But when does it ever stop changing? The Dutch guilders I have in my pocket will become worthless. Our love will smolder on, bursting into occasional flame, which it may not survive. Someone will paint over the burned building, though the scent will linger.

We watch as the potential blaze subsides into a memory of smoke.



J. E. Knowles's first novel, *Arusha*, is being published by Spinsters Ink. She is a native of Upper East Tennessee and a graduate of the Universities of Chicago and Oxford. "Where There's Smoke" was suggested by this P. J. Radley photograph. E-mail: write@jeknowles.com. Web: <http://jeknowles.com>



Leaving Ray

JANIS SPEHR

for ryl addison

WHEN SHE wakes it's still dark and the row of beads lie forest-cool against her skin. The man beside her sleeps solid as a fallen log; she eases herself out of bed, pulls on thick socks and pads to the kitchen. Everything's arranged: the dried dishes form neat ceramic humps along the sink and when she opens the door, the fridge's delicatessen light shows a tub of margarine and the plastic containers of shredded lettuce, sliced tomato and processed ham. She works quickly, pressing white bread against vegetables and meat, sprinkling salt and pepper and adding a spicy pickle for James. Through the window the bluish halo of dawn catches the metal spikes on the truck, the cradle for the logs. It's almost done. She parcels the sandwiches in Glad Wrap, stacks them in the fridge and stands at the window, her fingers on the beads. She wore these the day she was married, standing in the church listening to the minister's voice drone and feeling nauseous from the weight of the pressing child. They were the *something old* her fiancé laughed about as he slung them around her neck that morning. *Can't imagine you not wearing these.* For a moment she wanted to twist the thread and throw them away, those cheap glass beads strung in primary school and kept like a rosary all these years, but she just smiled and let him fasten the clasp. *I'm doing the right thing.* When Evan was born she lay watching them cast rainbow shards against dim walls, the light strained by sentinel trees lancing her puerperal hours. Her husband was always at work. Before the sun



cleared the hills and while the rain trickled dismal streamers down glass she heard him clanging wood into the stove and boiling water for tea. He loved these mornings, the grey sun ascending through dark branches and carving tracks through smoky drifts of air. The twenty-four wheels on the truck sounded like thunder and she would lie there, listening to them zigzag precariously down the road which joined the highway five kilometres below. *Loggerdog*. The sign sat proudly on the truck's nose. *I work like a dog*. He said this, all the time, cheerfully, while she, able only to coast above her body, languished for whole afternoons in a teenage summer. Against a prickly tartan rug spread beneath criss-crossed branches, she and Sandra were just two country girls with bleached hair, cut-off jeans and sugary pink lipstick spread thickly as cream. She'd throw the beads so that they lay like flotsam beneath fetid water patterned with the slimy flux of eels then watch her dive and break the surface with the glass spangling her hands. *Catch me, catch me now* flashing naked through the scrub laughing as they pitched and wrestled the beads spilling clear light in silty dirt their fingers twined and scrabbling, but Sandra broke free, always running ahead, out of that redneck town with its annual Truck and Country Music Show where the timber yards belched mucous-coloured smoke at midnight. There were letters from the Big Smoke *you'll love it, you'll love it here* but after a while they dried up like an empty creek bed running into dust. It was easy to sit behind the desk in the timber yard office typing and filing and watching the trucks come in, easy to laugh in the right places when the men came in off shift joky and eager to please Ray Brett Shane Glenn *don't listen to what this animal says*. She got crowned Miss AKD Softwoods 1975 with them making bets on whether she was a virgin and then Sandra came home from uni with



Rebecca, walking down the main street with her hair razored to a stubble her father's tears her mother's screaming and the town hissing delighted fountains of gossip *they're heartbroken...* Heartbroken: a stone split unevenly in two. Ray gave Miss Softwoods a heart-shaped, pink ceramic jewellery box and the beads lay at the bottom tangled with Brazilian coins and the hippie earrings her sister brought back from India. Ray brought around carnations and chocolates and a wristwatch with a heart-shaped gold face. The girls at the office cooed over the diamond which led to that slow walk down slightly scuffed crimson carpet the *lovely lilies* in the *Herald* the week's honeymoon in Fiji and the four-year-old brick veneer high up in the hills, but there was always the crackling counterpoint of Sandra *who comes from a normal family* parading down the street with Shelley then Elana then Fi the names strung haphazardly as baubles on twine. In Safeway one Friday afternoon a collision at the corner of Frozen Foods and Small Goods *hi, Deidre, how're you goin'* acting as though she'd never been away never worn a pin-striped vest and braces never seen a doe-rabbit dragging her soft belly on the ground caught in the headlights' glare.

The beads got fished from the garbage by Ray's mother that child of Depression thrift to *make a pretty toy for the baby*. She hung them over the cot with a plastic dolphin the morning Ray drove his wife to the hospital. *It's hard but wonderful* the girls in the office said but no-one told her about being split like a watermelon spread and screaming then stitched together again then falling into endless afternoons of viscous water and light while pyramids of dross built up behind doors and along window sills and she woke in time to face her husband's bewildered homecoming questions *You haven't done anything, why haven't you done anything?* When she stopped looking after the child



they took her to the doctor who wrote out a prescription for happy pills and recommended the local hydrotherapy class. *Getting out with other mums will do you good.* Evenings she sat brain-dead in front of *LA Law* while Ray tinkered in his shed. When she lay beside him she was often someone else when she lay beneath him she was always somewhere else the stars glimpsed through the window promising another red wall of pain but James slipped out easily as an eel, her luminous, wand-handed boy grasping at the web of spinning lights. She walked him in a pusher along mountain tracks then came home to cook lunch and tidy up the rubble of toys the miniature trucks which got larger and larger until the first boy started school. She cut lunches and ironed clothes and drove the Commodore *Mum's Taxi* a mundane window in the rear window. Every February she spread a tartan rug for her family at the Truck and Country Music festival the gleaming wheels dwarfing her children as Evan ran shouting among the latest model utes and James helped the ladies set out cakes. *There's something wrong with that boy,* Ray said in a worried tone of voice. *You had him around at home too much.* Men in white sequinned suits often sang about the cold Kentucky rain and Slim Dusty walked a country mile around hay bales and Rotary hot dog stands. *It was a great day out,* everyone agreed, shovelling paper plates and plastic forks into bins. *A great day a great day a great day* piling into the Holden station wagon the four-wheel-drive the rusty ute with its two yapping heelers *but gotta go home, get the kids off to school* and then driving through the town the smoke from AKD, the braying cows in abattoir-bound trucks and the lake dark as an eye with its skim of foam. Pouring milk into bowls set out on a chequered cloth while *Loggerdog*, that faithful plodding dog toiled steadily up and down the hills and the radio babbled news of the



Gulf War, the Barcelona Olympics, the information super highway leading all the way to the local Harvey Norman and the Pentium 486 *for the boys' assignments and things. Learning is a lifelong process* a teacher told Deidre at a parent-teacher night. *Learning is a thing which never ends.* Coming in to Evan's room one evening with a load of clean footy gear *learning should always be encouraged* the smell of frying rissoles and boiling veg and on the screen a tumble of frozen flesh a black snarling butch and a white and lacy femme. *Finish your homework, sweetie.* Deidre might have been blind for all the notice that she took but later she lay next to Ray thinking about those pliant silicon girls, that avalanche of thighs and hair. *Learning is a lifelong process. Learning is a thing which never ends.* This is what she remembered after Ray took the truck away and the school bus rumbled down the hill.

www.hotlezaction.com.au www.womanonwoman.com.au www.wetwomen.com.au

The pictures splayed out before her eyes diving into that salmon-coloured skin, the hair bleached white as grass sliding beneath her fingers, the kohl-rimmed eyes glowed black like holes in ice. Her finger traced a shaved runway of pubic hair the screen dabbed with greasy moisture from her hand. The old chair creaked she shifted and moaned her heat locked on the seat of kitchen vinyl. She gagged herself before that swell of bodies she rocked back and forth then the phone's shrill tore her hand away. (It was someone wanting money for the Heart Foundation.) The rest of the day she vacuumed and scrubbed, kneeling beside the bath like a penitent until her knees reddened and her fingers ached but it was no good and that night she crawled into bed beside Ray swollen and dirty as a leper. She mounted him and rode him to his amazed and grateful pleasure and next day she started all



over again.

At the end of the month Ray came into the kitchen, *jeez, look at this*, Internet bill in hand, eyes flapping concern but all Deidre said, looking him straight in the eye was, *school, Ray, we have to educate our children*. The kids went away on a school camp and she stayed up all night, huddled in a blanket in her son's room until thin bird voices cajoled her into the kitchen plugging in the kettle like a zombie her fingers trembling while the beads strung in the window clutched at the threadbare light.

But all good things blur to a bore: the same mouths the same eyes the same tits cunt arse elbows everywhere the same the same the same. *Can you talk to people on the Internet?* Deidre asked Evan one evening *talk about their hobbies and things? Oh, get with the program, Mum*. Deidre voyaged out into cyberspace as *longfingers* who knew all about chat rooms and on-line dating. *longfingers* could be anyone, go anywhere, a binary ballerina with a sloppy sloppy heart. She danced jadedly with Jade, serenaded Serena and bumped along the information *autobahn* with Anna-marie. One night she entered the Ladies Lounge advertising all kinds of *lovelorn gay ladies seeking romance relationships and discreet bi-adventures*. Deidre scrolled expertly through a gallery of yearning and hope: Rachel from Liverpool (NSW) *breeds poodles and seeks genuine ladies only* (Deidre had become considerably more sophisticated over the past few months and wondered if this was some warning about transsexuals.) Sophie from Oxford who *sails through life like a Proustian beret* (better than being in a Proustian beret) and then there's Sandra, tanned face under a regal white crop *49 yo professor of archaeology survivor of recently ended 11*



year relationship. Interests include: films, baseball, jogging, camping. Seeks contact with professional woman (pref 35-55) for friendship poss. rel/ship. longfingers logs on: a 43 yo doctor from Australia loves to travel. Past-times: swimming camping bushwalking music—and often watch your wonderful national game on cable! Write me now!

She does! Sandra and *longfingers* hit it off! Their messages arc across the ocean they're batted back and forth like strikes from high-speed pitches and Deidre hears all about Patti the real estate agent with the heart of solid tin, the type of expensive tents Sandra owns and the joys of white-water rafting...Sandra asks where the fascinating doctor goes. *longfingers* vividly describes the Otways that *dense and temperate rain forest* the haunting canopies of leaves the breathing soil *fetid water patterned with the slimy flux of eels* white splinters from a dropped strand of light...

silence

a number of silent weeks go by

[*Loggerdog* trawls bravely up the hills] then:

you left me

i didn't mean to

you liar betrayer

i didn't mean to I was scared

not good enough!

a number of furious weeks go by

you'd be surprised how the old place has changed



not changed enough

they no longer hold Miss AKD Softwoods

missed that send me pictures of the tiara and gown

[an attachment of photos from 1975]

gorgeous thank god the seventies will never come again

perhaps you'd like to see how the kids look?

no anyway they probably look like Ray

bitch i missed you all these years

suffer

i did

the ticket's at the airport.

Then all that's left is:

suitcase

sandwiches

note

She writes quickly and fluently the sloping letters slash the page but she doesn't say sorry because she knows there's no forgiveness, no redemption for what she's doing, her sons splattered with the hot scald of gossip within the hour and the trail of whispers following her across the sea *they're heartbroken*. Her husband will be all right: she thinks that the truck will continue to toil methodically up and down the hill gallantly bearing its load of logs. In time he will meet a busy practical younger girl who will bear him two children and they will grow up to



watch trees fall in stately measured arcs. She hates the trees, they've fenced her life, thrusting their dark heads through drizzle and fog. She dreams of the desert, of snow-haired, leathery wisewomen squinting into the sun and of flattened-out, red dirt names drying her fertile body to a husk. Once she gets there she'll send her boys a few seeds in an envelope, light enough to be strung on a single cotton thread, ephemera tossed on the wind or pounded to a floury paste. She flings a sheet of pink and lilac flowers across the table then sets down the plain white bowls being careful not to clatter them against the knives. She leaves the note weighted with the string of beads those chipped and splintered orbs holding the history of two girls their heads together in a primary school art class one February afternoon the hot air pressed down with the weight of eucalyptus from the trees outside. *What will we do? Let's do this!* the beads carefully guarded against pillaging outsiders strung then sliding onto the floor in a giggling fit strung again the ends of the string knotted and forced around the joining clasp. *I want them! No, I want them!* A bundle of legs against the old boards and fingers clamping floss-fine hair until a teacher in a flowered shift pulls them apart and tells them to *stop acting like boys!* *Deidre! Sandra!* Holding a pad of gauze over a knee grooved bloody and stroking a tender scratch. *You keep them! No, you keep them!* A sullen truce the beads kept close by one then surrendered passed back and forth all that year adorning the Virgin Mary's blue gown in the Christmas play or swinging in the airy window of a summer cubby house. Worn to a first high school dance over a black nylon blouse and burgundy hostess skirt, draped across the bass amp the three gigs her brother's Glam Rock tribute band played and afterwards at a party one night drunken stumbles on the dance floor a haze of Jim Beam and



joints making *two chicks together* OK. The drunken pash on frayed satin cushions sharp animal wetscent lading stale perfume Santana's rhythm a crazy giggling tumble into a car parked away from the light wetscent on fingers snarling hair pillowed beneath her the wetscent of fingers kissed one by one fingers slowly kissed and sucked then inside her. Next morning a bruise delicate as a thumbprint on fruit next to her mouth and then the phone call *let's go to the creek*. They found each other in a small clearing spreading the rug on the damp mulch of leaves next to the old Holden workhorse-stolid with the beads dangling from its rear view mirror. Later they bathed in the humid brown water and burnt leeches off their arms with a 10 cent plastic lighter, laughing and flinging the blood-gorged filth away. *We could go away and be always like this* nestled together on the rug. *We could go away together* but already Ray was coming round to chop up half a shed of redgum and drive her to the cricket. *Ray's a good steady boy* her father said. *We could go away and get a flat*. Sandra's hand molded a timid waist. *Ray's a good steady boy* her mother said. *We could go away...Ray's a really top bloke* her brother said. *We could go away a really top bloke we could go away a good steady boy a good steady boy we could go a good steady boy a really great mate a good steady boy we could...*

After she whispers the phone call she moves quietly to the room where her youngest son lies in a naked tangle. She touches his face then the spiny dune of fur which runs from his navel to his nestled cock, straightens the sheet pulls up the blankets looks at her note... *[she shreds the note she tears it to confetti then leaves it strewn in a careless spiral at the bottom of the bin.*



When Ray comes into the kitchen she kisses him good morning and he gives a little skittish wince then switches the kettle on. The boys draggle in, yawning and scratching, jostling each other companionably and whingeing that she forgot to buy Coco Pops. She shreds the note and her life runs on, driving them to footy training, working her one-day-a-week at Bi-Lo, then another Truck Show...] but then there's a gravelly crunch of tyres the taxi's watery overhead light as the door swings open. *Looks like a good day for it* she doesn't know him a man with piebald stubble and a blurry mermaid along one arm. *Yes, a good day,* she echoes, a stroke of luck, no conversation needed about *hubby and the kids* she'll make up stories say she's bound for Ballarat for Tottenham for Rio de Janeiro driving fifty kilometres a month ago so no-one would see her fill the passport application out. She carries a small handbag, wears a skirt and clumpy-heeled shoes because she knows what this town is like can't let it be said that she left looking like *a freakshow her hair was pink she wore six inch stiletto heels her vinyl dress patterned like snake.* The dog twitches and stirs as she settles herself primly on the backseat but he's too old to bother waking up the house. (She remembers him, a tiny spotted pup whining when Ray put him in the kennel the first night. *He has to learn to be on his own.*) Static cleaves the news and weather there's the spin of a gold-furred steering wheel and it's done leaving behind her sling of safety that net of comfort for a promise of a postcard sun. The single light from the kitchen impales her regret but already it's cracking like the stains across an old, imperfectly-sealed photograph. She remembers James learning to walk, catching him before he pitched and fell. She remembers Sandra, exile-eyes gazing straight ahead in the main street but not letting go her girlfriend's hand. *She had to learn to be on her*



own. Her own life's been a pact, a refuge which was never sanctuary but now impatience threads her veins and as the taxi pulls into the station she sees the first yellow tips of leaves shooting from woody stems. She feels unfurling blossom flame vital as capillaries through her body. She wants to be an honest pariah. She's going to join the other outlaws and as she hands the man money and steps onto the moving train her history refracts, splattering its neon harvest across the bridal thaw of her heart.



JANIS SPEHR



Janis Spehr is a writer whose short fiction has been widely published since 1996; publications include *Westerly*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Space: New Writing* and *Antipodes* (USA). She has twice won the Sisters in Crime Scarlet Stiletto prize and has been equal first prize winner in the University of Canberra National Short Story Competition (1999). She is currently writing a novel about the French lesbian artists, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore.



Claiming The Angel

JD GLASS

THESE ARE the things that go down hard. In these last few weeks work has been changing, home has been changing. We're working the same shifts, we're working split shifts—it seems like we're never not working. And something else is changing, too: you. In these same last few weeks, I see the way they look at you, our coworkers, our peers, the way everyone responds to your smile, their gazes lingering as you walk by. And I see too, what they want.

They want you, and you don't know it. You're mine, but others want you. I hate that the only thing I have for you lately is snappy jokes or sharp retorts—because in these last few weeks of overwork and undersleep, of not enough “us” and too much of everything else, I've forgotten how to speak.

But Shannon hasn't—and she makes you smile. Oh, it's not the same smile, not the one you had for me, but all the same, it's something I can't seem to do lately.

What I can do, what I've been *very* successful at, is the eliciting of the surprised snap of shock and hurt in your eyes before you shrug it off. I think you're turning off to me; I think I'm pushing the buttons to do it.

The other day at dinner with your family you said something, the sort of thing you're likely to say, and I shot you down—another quick joke, another bitter smile.



Your cousin's dark appraisal under raised eyebrow said more to me than a thousand words ever could—and mute again, I couldn't even apologize. I wanted to.

I think your family hates me.

Even mine has noticed. I ran into my brother Pat today after that call, outside the ER entrance where so many emergency vehicles parked it seemed like a tailgate party.

"So how you guys doin'?" he asked after the usual catch-up are-you-okay inquiries and the squaring away of details that always follow these sorts of incidents. "Anything uh, going on?"

We'd been so busy, I'd forgotten about even that, and the combination of concern and awkwardness in his question, a question about one of the most beautiful moments in our life together, seemed to me the perfect reason to make yet another one of my dumb jokes, at my expense, at yours, about the whole thing. No, that's a lie. I didn't even think about it—I just answered.

Pat stared for a moment, as shocked at me as I was. "Baby girl, you're fucking up," he told me quietly.

Anger and remorse made something squirm painfully under my ribs. "I know."

"You're gonna lose her if you keep this up."

"I *know*," I answered again. "I'm handling it."

"You better," he warned, "because"—he nodded and not twenty feet away where another unit had parked behind mine, was patrol, and who else but Shannon was the first to greet you as you stepped out



from the ER doors—"you've got serious competition."

"I'm not worried about it," I told him. But inside? Inside I wondered if you noticed her the same way she did you to my eyes. I wondered if you had a clue of what she wanted, and if ultimately she could bring something to you, give something I couldn't—not lately, not anymore. It left me scared and silent, "outside" voice forgotten, or maybe even gone from disuse, along with the words I needed to tell you something other than "I'm tired" or "I'm in a bad mood." Those...have been the nicest things.

I didn't really notice Pat's friendly slap on the shoulder of goodbye, and Shannon, who always managed to piss me off lately, I barely nodded to. Instead, I walked over to you and opened my mouth wide and far enough to kill the spark of welcome in your eyes.

I push you, I wound you, and all I really want to do is throw myself at your feet, swear it will never happen again, then swim in you, under you, through you.

But I don't know how to speak, and all I do know is that when Shannon said something that made you smile again, I really wanted to see her teeth scatter like tic tacs from somewhere under my hand.

I seethed instead, steaming on a cool gray day like the fog and mist that rose from the ground, only I was hot, so hot I thought I'd explode.

During the call, it was your hands that covered mine briefly, a split second of the brush of your wrist where it was bare above the gloves on mine as you handled the tools that breathed for our patient.

Our eyes met just as briefly in the jostle and jolt of the rig and



nothing else mattered but what we were doing—and we did it together.

This one...it *was* bad, really bad: a member of service went down and if we did our job right, and if luck was on his side—lots of it, the miracle kind—he might come back up, eventually. We acknowledged it in that glance, the silent pact made: we'd fight like hell and try anyway—anything, everything, to save that precious spark. We barely managed it, but we delivered something viable to the ER as opposed to a forensic package—though that still might happen, later, out of our sight, out of our hands.

There was a lot of paperwork afterwards thanks to the multi-service response and involvement; Shannon ambushed me with more of it when I finally returned to the station at the end of my shift, perhaps not quite an hour after yours. The sly smirk I wanted to wipe off her face in the worst way widened when my cell rang—and it was you, telling me you're home.

"Home and alone?" the smirk said. "And you've at least another"—she glanced at the forms—"hour. Maybe an hour and a half."

I focused on the paper and the line of print before me. I wondered why the pen didn't melt or snap in two as I shoved it across the white field. I heard a low, steady sound, and realized I ground my teeth while spearing through the page. It wasn't loud enough to drown Shannon's words as she placed her hands on my shoulders and spoke.

"Jean...Tori's going to promote soon and everyone knows it. She'll be transferred, her shift will change. You know how this works—and who determines the 'needs of service.' You need to play ball and work with me, baby girl, so this can all work out all right."



Her touch was more than familiar, it was intimate: the touch of family, friends, and once, for a little while, something...more. She rubbed her thumbs over the knots in my neck. It was gentle, sure, effective, but it wasn't you.

Suddenly, I didn't know and I didn't care that Shannon was my superior officer, or my cousin, or anything and I stood up and tossed the papers across her desk.

"I'm done," I snarled out as I faced her. "Report me, write me up, suspend me—I don't fuckin' care anymore—I'm not gonna just let you come on to my wife." Teeth like tic tacs flew through my mind's eye again and it took real effort not to clench my fists. I couldn't stop the hot that flowed through me.

"Temper, Jean," Shannon said softly. She leaned back against the wall next to the door frame. Eyes lighter than mine calmly, coolly, considered me, and the smirk was gone. "You're sharing that a little too much lately. I'd like to see you both remain in the same battalion—same days on and off. She still thinks she's in love with you—maybe, just maybe, I'm looking out for *both* of you—instead of *just* you—for once."

All the anger flew away, leaving me somehow deflated, except for the little bit left that I focused on myself. Of course. I'd been suspicious of seemingly everyone and their motives lately, which made me moody and raw and now...now I felt guilty on top of it for accusing my cousin—my *first* cousin, as related to me as if we were half siblings—of something she wouldn't do. Oh, I wasn't stupid, I knew there was a real attraction to you underneath whatever Shannon said, but she wouldn't poach. Not unless she thought I was really fucking up.



Not fucking up meant doing my job, doing it right. I sat back down and finished the paper work without another word between us. “Take tomorrow,” Shannon said when I finally managed to finish everything without requiring either new forms or writing instruments. “I think you need it,” she told me as I walked out the door. “Tell Tori the same.”

My hands were numb on the steering wheel as I drove home, as numb as my mind and when it hit me I swore to the uncaring radio I hadn’t even been listening to. We’d had plans, you and I, we’d had dinner plans—I had the impression you wanted to tell me something, and I have fucked up again.

In addition to forgetting how to speak, I am also guilty of being too late to recover any of whatever it was you had in mind. So now I’m tired again, frustrated, feeling the itching in my finger tips that still want to do grievous bodily harm to my cousin just for looking at you the way she does no matter what she says and when I finally walk through our door, even Dusty, our dog, doesn’t bother to say hello.

I find out why after I chuck my jacket and hang it on the peg as she raises her head from her paws to acknowledge me from her place on the rug: by your feet, where you’ve fallen asleep on the sofa, waiting—for me.

“Good girl, Dusty,” I tell her softly, and pat her head briefly as I close in on the sofa. She’s watching you, guarding you—I’m proud of her for doing it—she does it better than I do, and without any snappy comments either.

I can’t help the soft sigh that escapes me as I see your face. The last few years have left some gentle lines, but they’re all gone now in



your sleep, in your dreams, and as I watch you, I sit lightly on the edge, next to you, and you shift unconsciously, making room for me.

I'm not tired, I'm not angry, I'm just a little sad. I gaze down again and can't help but trace the defining lines of your face, smooth through the hair you've let get a little longer lately, silky and soft as it pours through my fingertips. I'm sad because I can't make you smile anymore, sad because if someone else, someone worthwhile, made you happy I'd step aside, sad because despite all the dumb muteness I can't seem to shake, I know that no one loves you the way I do—not that they don't want to try.

I don't want to be mute anymore—I don't want to be *me* anymore—and I just give in to the way I feel, the overflowing in my chest that hurts because I love you so damned much even as I hug you to me, fit my body to yours, every curve known, precious, familiar, and as necessary to me as breathing.

You call me “angel” all the time, but it's not true, baby, it's not true. You're my heart and my light and I can't help but kiss you, run hands filled with love and desire and possession over you and you begin to wake even as I feel your skin, warm, soft, your heart beat under my palm before I skate it over your breast, the tip that hardens for me, and your kiss...your kiss is sleepy, achingly sensual, and even while you protest as you try to shift once more to reach me, I hush you with my lips.

“Please, baby. Let me,” I beg silently with my tongue on yours, and instead of under your shirt, I'm unbuttoning it, revealing the silky expanse of your skin, my hips pressed solidly against your firm backside. You flash eyes ringed with deep forest green around ale-red



center over your shoulder at me even as I lean over you, fill my hand with your curves, pause to feel your heart, the beat strong, steady, real, under my palm before I trace it down the length of you and I don't know how your jeans disappeared and I don't care either as I claim your mouth once more, and while once more my tongue visits yours, so too do I let a finger slip between lips that welcome me in a hot embrace, a hint of hardness and slickness as I travel, a stroke of promise along this groove, this part of you that you give to me—and it is a gift, I know that. Every downstroke finds the tip of my finger against your wet welcome, every upstroke brings that wetness against the sensitive hardness that pushes insistently, an insistence, a need my body feels and answers, a need I want to fulfill.

“Skin,” you half gasp, a welcome hot breath against my throat because we have shifted together and I lie on top of you, your thighs embracing mine, and you lean up to kiss me even as your hands pull my shirt from my waistband. I don't want to stop what I'm doing, don't want to stop touching you, loving you.

“Skin...*now*,” you growl against my lips and it's a demand, another desire I want—no, I *need*—to meet, and for a moment I savor the taste of you before I comply: fire meets fire, your hands with my hands, we do this together.

We are close and hot and tight and I am beautifully lost and wonderfully found, no longer mute. I know the things I've forgotten, remember and relearn you, me, the sacredness of us—it fills my heart as you enter me, then stretches my mind, my body, my soul. I am forgiven, I am absolved, and my heart, so full, now overflows from the beautiful whispered “oh yes” that warms my ear as I enter you, and the



knowledge that floods me when I do, because you are so soft and so smooth and the way you feel is like nothing I've ever felt before. I know, I *feel*, the physical proof literally in—on—my hands, a pliant close-fit around me, showing me what you wanted to tell me.

"Tori...baby," I choke out, amazed with what I've learned, with the way you make me feel. I kiss your neck, the tender skin just below your chin, catch your mouth with mine as I feel the fine line edge building through you.

"Perfect, angel. That's perfect," you tell me, the words throaty, low, and you're already doing what I love, what I need, showing me in every way you can what you feel, *how* you feel, bringing me with you to that place we're both shooting for—because we do this together, the cascade-chain-reaction of love and lust as you say the words your body proves, and I echo them in the same ways.

There is such perfect trust in your eyes, such open, honest love for me in your gaze...it floors me. I have been a jerk, and you love me. I have been surly, and you embrace me. You are my heart, you are my life, you are—the realization chokes me with its fullness and you reach for and wipe away the first tear before it even falls.

"Angel, what's the matter?" There is nothing but gentle concern in your voice, the same in your touch on my face.

"I've...I've been such a jerk lately," I answer honestly. "I'm so sorry, baby, so sorry." I hold you closer, kiss you between each word.

"Well," you tell me, "I'll pass on the jerk thing again, but..." and you trace a very delicate trail down my nose, "keep the sexy arrogant thing. That I like."



“Just ‘like,’ huh?”

You’re already pulling me even closer to you when you say, “Maybe more. I’m gonna show you.”

Sometime later you stir next to me and under the blanket one of us has pulled from the back of the sofa. “Stay, baby,” I tell you and pull you back into me, on top of me, because I’m in love with how it all feels, “we’re both off tomorrow.”

“Yeah?” you ask, then nuzzle against my neck.

“Yeah,” I confirm, then kiss you as nuzzle becomes a taste. “And good thing, too,” I add, because kiss and taste have become the knowing reach of hands to re-mark and re-map claimed and beloved territory.

“Why’s that?”

We are already fitting together; the familiar entwine only adds to the anticipation, because each experience with you still feels like a first. I gaze up at your face and my heart lifts, expansive and light at the sight of your smile, “my” smile on your lips as I ease beneath you. “Well,” I tell you with a smile of my own, because I love you, because I’m happy, because I don’t think you know what your body has told me, and I am eager to touch you, to feel that, to learn and know it all over again. “We’ve got lots to talk about.”

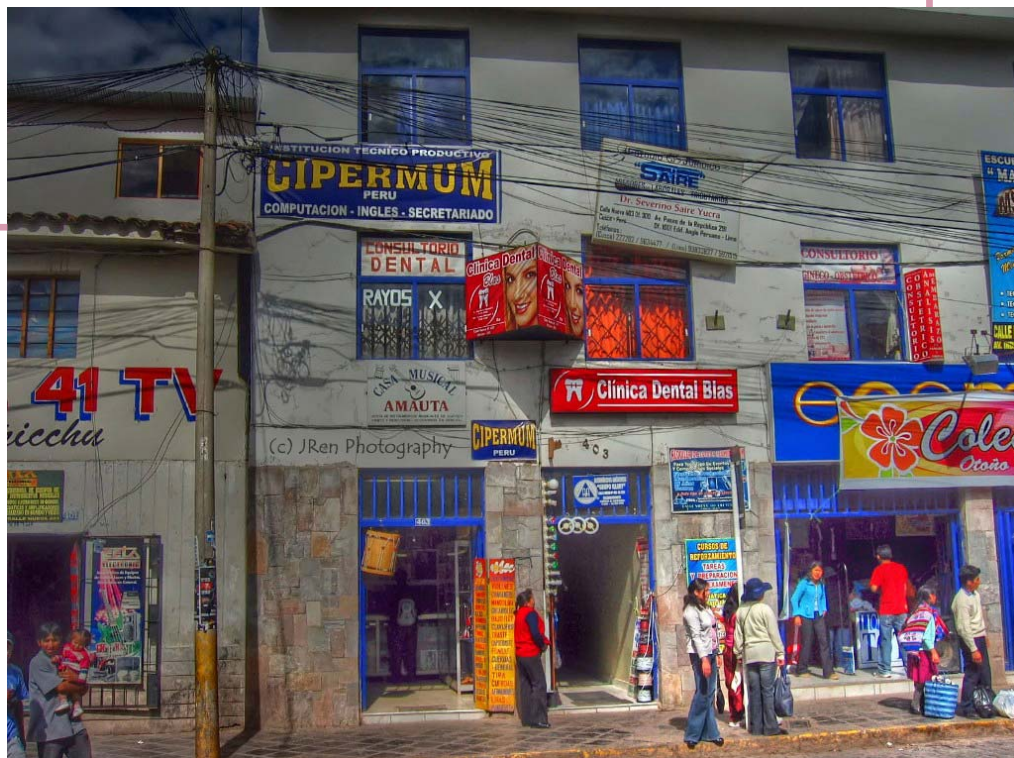


JD Glass lives in the city of her choice and birth, New York. Occasionally called "one of the next generation of writers to look out for," she is the author of Lambda Literary Award finalist *Punk Like Me*, its follow up *Punk and Zen*, Lambda Literary and Ben Franklin Award finalist *Red Light*, *American Goth*, and *X*. Lead singer of NY's *Life Underwater* and an inveterate doodler of eye-candy, these actually come to life in *Yuri Monogatari 6* anthology, with a side story from *American Goth* (*Sakura Gun* (London)) as well as graphic novel *Sakura Gun* (*Cherry Blossom Warrior*). Her forthcoming novella—*Triskelion*—which contains a side story from the Punk, Goth, and Sakura series—will be a part of the *Outsiders* collection (October 2009, Brisk Press) alongside works by Georgia Beers, Lynn Ames, Susan Smith and SX Meagher. Words, news, music, and various bits of wit and whimsy (including updates on new works) can be found at myspace.com/jdglass.



Magic Lantern Images JREN

Cusco, Peru



Freedom

Portals to Wonder....
Machu Picchu



Gretzilla



Neglected Faith



Fall
Contemplation



Poetry of Life



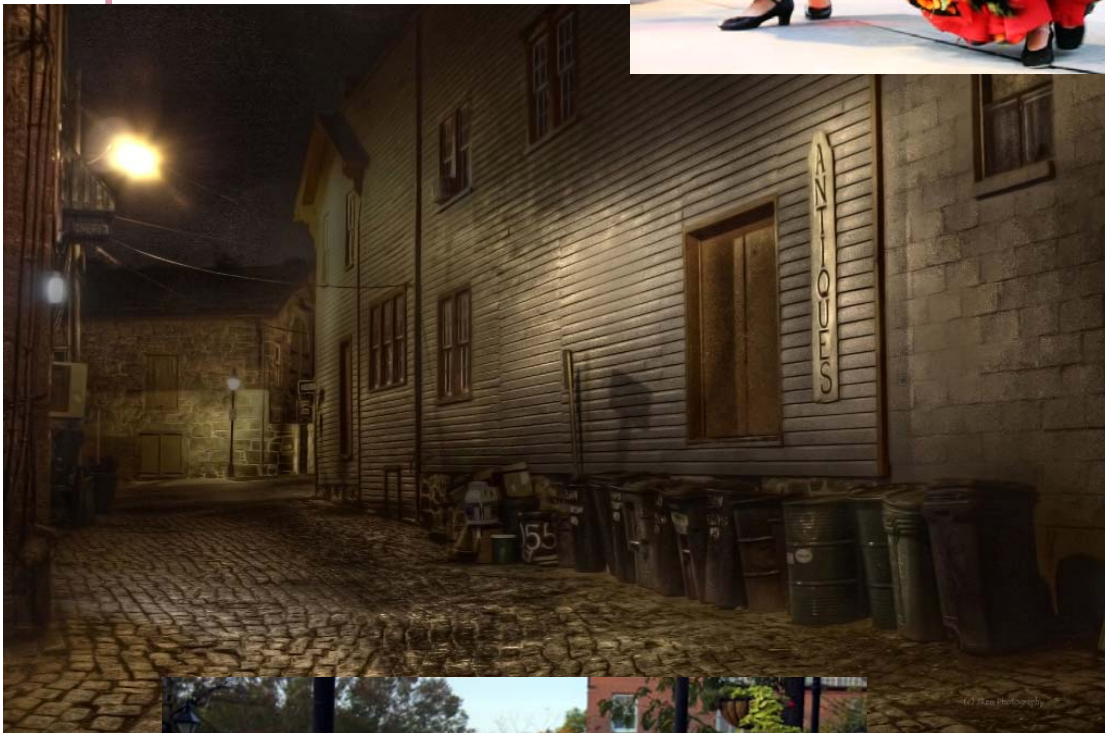
El Gato Patrols

JREN

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Fire
Dancers



Not
On
the
Tour



Wasted



Flying



Light
Sonata



JRen was born in Houston, Texas, and raised in a small town about fifty miles outside of the city. Being a gay, liberally-minded young woman in a small Texas town wasn't easy, however, and after school, JRen headed back to the big city. Since then JRen has worked as a bartender, a construction worker, a short-order cook, a staff accountant, and more recently, as a photographer. In 2003, she moved to Maryland for three years and discovered a love of hiking. Wanting to share the beauty of the world she was seeing, JRen bought her first digital camera and soon discovered her second love, photography. In 2008, JRen started a small photography business that specializes in lifestyle portraiture, travel, and commercial photography. JRen met her partner in 2007 and in 2008 they both travelled to Peru and intend to go back in 2010 to hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, trusty camera in hand, of course. See more of JRen's work at www.jrenphotos.com. Email her at jren@jrenphotos.com



Package X

VICKI STEVENSON

WHAM! WHEN she made her entrance, she kicked the bar door so hard that it swung all the way around and hit the wall. We all spun on our stools and stared in disbelief at the figure silhouetted against the gray winter sky that Sunday afternoon. In her left hand, she carried a high-end leather notebook computer case. Under her right arm were crammed three loose-leaf binders that we later found out contained the mysterious Package X (Volumes 1, 2, and 3). It was a formidable load, but if anybody could cope with it, it looked to me like she'd be the one.

From behind the bar, Dindy broke the stunned silence. "Bobbi, maybe you should help the woman with her stuff."

"I can handle it," the woman said confidently as she made her way to the bar.

She was a looker. She stood almost six feet tall, and her dark hair contrasted strikingly with her deep blue eyes. Not exactly my type, but eye candy nevertheless. She set the computer case and the binders on the bar and scrutinized each of us. She took her time. Finally she introduced herself. Her voice was calm, firm, and confident.

With only five words, she had everybody in the bar scared shitless: "I'm the Lesbian Tax Lady." Gesturing at her computer and binders, she added, "I have here everything necessary to complete your tax returns. I'm giving everybody in here the lowest rate around



because you're sisters. That way we keep our money in the community. I'm happy, you're happy."

Instant headache. "Disaster comes to the Brass Bucket," I murmured to Bobbi.

I spoke very softly, and the Tax Lady was six stools away, but she heard me anyway. Her words shot out of her mouth like machine-gun bullets. "Have-you-done-your-taxes-yet?"

Now my head was really pounding. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the trace of a smile on Bobbi's face. She was actually enjoying this. Some friend. I pressed my fingertips against my temples. My neck was suddenly stiff. I rotated my body ninety degrees to the left and faced her.

"Well...um...I haven't gathered all my tax stuff together yet," I said, still pressing my fingers against my head.

"Have you received all your W-2s and 1099s?" she barked.

The woman exuded power. Even though she was asking sort of a personal question, I felt I had to answer her truthfully. I started to hyperventilate.

"Well...um...everything's there, I guess, but I haven't had a chance to separate it from the junk mail," I said shakily. I hoped she would be so disgusted by my mail indolence that she'd pick on somebody else, like maybe Bobbi, who seemed to think there was something funny about all this.

The Tax Lady slid off her stool and stalked slowly toward me. She didn't stop until her face was only a foot away from mine. The eye contact was killing me. I was vaguely aware that I might look silly



sitting on my stool almost nose-to-nose with this woman, her standing with her hands on her hips, me with my fingertips pressed against my temples, trembling. After what seemed like an eternity, she spoke. She started softly and got progressively louder as her sentence reached a chilling crescendo.

“Do you mean to tell me,” she almost whispered, obviously more repulsed than she had ever been in her life, “that you haven’t separated,” she continued, louder, “your tax papers from your junk mail?” she boomed.

“Bobbi, I think I need some help here,” said a tiny voice. I realized the voice was mine.

“How’re you gonna print the returns?” Bobbi asked her.

Slowly, she shifted her gaze to Bobbi. I exhaled.

“When I’ve completed everybody’s return,” she said, suddenly calm, “I’ll bring in my laser printer from the car. I’ll just plug it in somewhere, and I’ll print out all the returns at once.”

“But what if somebody wants to file electronically?” Bobbi is borderline genius.

“Naturally, I can do that.” She patted her leather case. “This is an HP Pavilion dv9500t with an Intel Core2 Duo Processor and wireless Internet. But I don’t advise filing electronically.”

“Why not? They say it’s much more reliable,” Bobbi objected.

The Tax Lady heaved a sigh. “Okay, now stop and think. Just about everybody who issues W-2s and 1099s transmits that data to the IRS computers. If you transmit your return the same way, then



their computers will have everything they need to trigger an audit without any human intervention. But if you mail it in printed form, a human would have to examine it and do some checking to see if you might be a candidate for an audit. So your chances of being audited are greatly reduced. That's my take on it, but I can swing both ways."

Bobbi raised an eyebrow. "Is that a fact?"

"I'm talking about alternative filing methods," said the disgusted Tax Lady.

"Uh-huh. But nobody has their tax stuff here," said Bobbi matter-of-factly.

"No problem. I'll just sit here and have a beer while you guys all go home and get your 'tax stuff,' as you call it."

A couple of the women said that they would go home and get their tax stuff and be back in a few minutes. I stared at my beer and hoped I was relatively inconspicuous. It didn't work.

"What about you, Junk-Mail Head?"

At that very moment, a bolt of inspiration hit me from out of the blue. With only five words, I could get her irrevocably off my case.

"I don't have any money." I heaved a sigh of relief.

"I take MasterCard and Visa," she growled.

The woman was ruthless. A terrible pain suddenly gripped my stomach. I covered my eyes and contemplated the meaning of life.

"Excuse me, where are the vending machines?" a strange voice whispered in my ear. I looked up and saw the face of an angel. She



looked innocent and at the same time intelligent. I was captivated.

“Cigarettes, you mean?”

“Well, whatever machines they have,” she said with a smile. She was fairly tall and had a terrific figure. Her hair, which appeared to be naturally blonde, was slightly wavy and just past shoulder length.

“There’s only the cigarettes and the jukebox.” I gazed into her gorgeous green eyes. I was fading fast.

“Oh...I see. Well, I wonder, then.”

“What’re you looking for?”

“I’m just wondering where the natural place would be to put my machine,” she said as she peered around the bar.

“Your machine? What do you mean? What kind of machine do you have?”

“A vending machine for dental dams.” She grinned proudly.

“What a concept,” interjected Bobbi, who should have been minding her own business. “That’s really...modern!”

I was speechless. I couldn’t take my eyes off the Damsel. “How much do you charge for a dental dam?” I finally blurted.

“Fifty cents,” she replied suggestively.

“That seems fair.” I was wishing I could think of something clever to say, but my mind was hopelessly muddled.

The Tax Lady broke the silence. “It belongs in the bathroom with the feminine hygiene products.”

“Oh, that’s so mundane,” the Damsel protested. “I think it



should be right next to the jukebox, so nobody will miss it,” she continued, shifting her attention to the Tax Lady.

Snap. I saw it right then, at that very moment. I saw it in the Tax Lady’s eyes. She was hooked. She was hooked on the Damsel. “Well, that’s a thought,” she said weakly. The Damsel smiled.

“So anyway,” I said, “how long have you been in business?”

“Only six months. I started last October. It’s been going surprisingly well.”

“Have you done your taxes for last year yet?” the Tax Lady asked.

“Well, no. I’ve been so busy. There’s a big demand for dental dams these days and—”

“You haven’t? Have you kept track of your expenses? What’s your cost per dental dam? What’s your cost/revenue ratio?”

“Gee, that’s kind of personal,” said the Damsel in surprise. She glanced around the bar. “People are listening,” she added cautiously. She was blushing.

“Sorry, but it’s just that it sounds like you’ve got quite a deal going here, and you really need a sharp Tax Lady, such as myself, to make sure you get every deduction you’re legally entitled to.”

“You can do that? You know all the forms to fill out, and everything?”

The Tax Lady laughed seductively. “Come here and look at this.” She motioned to the binders on the bar.

“What is it?” asked the wide-eyed Damsel.



There was a reverent silence, after which she finally spoke. "This is Package X, my dear."

The Damsel gazed in awe at the binders. "I've never seen Package X," she whispered.

The Tax Lady opened the first binder (Volume 1). "You see, I have in these three binders every single tax form that the IRS issues, together with complete instructions on how to fill them out. Do you understand the significance of that?"

"I think I do," said the Damsel after a moment's contemplation. "So...we have to somehow distill the essence of my dental dam vending machine business into these forms in Package X. So...do you practice safe sex?"

My opening at last! "I practice safe sex," I volunteered eagerly.

The Damsel turned to me and smiled broadly. I was liking it.

The Tax Lady glared at me. "Oh, don't bother with that one. She hasn't even separated her tax papers from her junk mail. Now, you'll need a Schedule C and plenty of documentation to back it up."

The Damsel's smile faded. "It'll take me quite a while to get everything together."

"Well, you'd better start A. S. A. P. if you want to avoid a late filing penalty," warned the Tax Lady. "Like right now, for instance."

"Gee, I wouldn't know where to begin."

The Tax Lady took the Damsel's hands in hers and said tenderly, "Tell you what, sweetie. Go home right now and gather up all of your receipts and canceled checks. I'll come over to your place tonight and



show you what to do.”

“Oh, you’re wonderful,” chirped the Damsel. She gave the Tax Lady her address and hurried out.

I watched the whole morbid episode in utter disbelief. I stared at my beer. “I don’t believe this,” I told the beer.

To my further surprise, the women who had left earlier to get their tax stuff both came back. The Tax Lady did their returns on her HP Pavilion notebook computer. She even let them look at some of the forms and instructions in Package X. It appeared to give them the warm feeling that they were getting every deduction they were legally entitled to.

Then she brought in a slick eleven-pound HP LaserJet 1018 printer from her car. She plugged it in next to the jukebox, cabled it to the computer, printed the tax returns, and collected a little over a hundred bucks from the “clients.” Just to show what a sport she was, she bought each of them a beer.

On her way out, she stopped and said to me, “I’ll give you a little lesson in life, Junk-Mail Head. Taxes are inevitable. Everybody needs a Tax Lady...get it?”

“I see,” I lied.

“Look at the bright side,” said Bobbi after the Tax Lady was gone. “Taxes are seasonal. Dental dams are year-round...get it?”

I didn’t get it right then, but I knew that hidden somewhere in all of this was the true meaning of life. I nodded knowingly. “Very subtle.”



VICKI STEVENSON



Vicki Stevenson has written these books (in order of publication): *Family Values*, *Family Affairs*, *Family Ties*, and *Certain Personal Matters*. And Goddess knows, she's tried to be profound. Really, she has. She's as obsessed as the next dyke with the problems and traumas we face as we try to find our place in a society that doesn't seem to have a clue as to what we're all about. She's also noticed that much of our fiction reflects various aspects of our seemingly hopeless situation and how we might, despite the circumstances, find happy endings. But wait, there's more!!! Vicki has a theory that a whimsical fantasy here and there has the potential to help us lighten up and feel better — if only for awhile. Sadly, the IRS stopped issuing Package X effective tax year 2005. So for this story you need to suspend your disbelief just a tiny bit. But still...it could happen, right?

Email Vicki Stevenson: JVickiS@aol.com



True Love **GEORGIA BEERS**

THE GENTLE tinkling of the piano floats out of the speakers and fills the living room, almost as warm as the fire crackling in the fireplace. I stretch my legs out on the couch, perfectly content to watch her. My body sinks into the soft, chocolate brown leather as the gentle strains of *O Come, All Ye Faithful* drift around the room. The instant I am settled, Willow jumps into my lap, kneads my thighs through my sweatpants, and curls into a ball. In the space of thirty seconds, she's purring at high volume.

I smile and shake my head at our calico, then sip from my oversized mug of coffee and Baileys and return my focus to the beautiful view in front of me.

"Are you sure you don't want my help?" I ask playfully. I already know the answer; I'm really only asking to be polite.

"Nope," she answers from her place on the stepladder. "You just sit there and look pretty."

"I'll try, but you're better at it. Maybe we should switch places."

She smiles at me and I can feel it across the room. This is my favorite time of year, just before the holidays. I love the warm feeling of our home, and I love watching her perform this yearly custom. I burrow more deeply into the couch and observe.

The tree is ridiculously large. I told her so when we picked it out



this morning. I tell her so every year, but she insists that with the high, vaulted ceilings of our living room, anything smaller than ridiculously large will seem dwarf-like. Every year, I roll my eyes teasingly at her reasoning, but every year she's right. A ridiculously large tree fits perfectly in the enormous bay window at the front of our house, and it looks so beautiful from the street, I know the neighbors are envious. The first time we back down the driveway, she'll be sure to point it out to me.

This room has a sort of ski lodge feel in the winter. The tree seems to belong, as if part of the décor should include a decorated evergreen. Between the stone fireplace, the inviting leather furniture, the thick oak end tables, and the braided rugs strewn across the oak hardwood, I sometimes feel as though I'm on vacation in Lake Tahoe.

She's already hung the lights like a pro (she *did* let me help with that part), tucking them around and under and in back, burying them expertly so they don't look like a string, but rather each branch has its own little individual bulb of color. Now, she's gently opening the first container of ornaments. She handles them delicately; I watch her long, elegant fingers as she cradles each one as if it was made of the finest crystal. She loves this. She lives for this once-a-year ritual. Each ornament means something to her, and most of them mean something to us. We're fussy about our ornaments. We buy one new piece each year—something nice, never anything cheesy. She picks up this year's, and I see the Christmas lights reflected in the tears that suddenly pool in her eyes.

"Rocky goes at the top." She climbs the stepladder and hangs the smiling, playful terrier ornament on one of the highest branches. We



lost our boy over the summer after fourteen loyal and loving years, and when I saw that ornament in the Hallmark store—a little white dog with stubby legs, a plaid, red and green Christmas scarf, and a playful sparkle in his brown eyes—I knew I had to bring it home to her. She cried big, wracking sobs in my arms as she clung to me with thanks.

“The top is a good place for him,” I say, nodding my approval and waiting for her to collect herself. She has no idea I’ve already been to visit a local breeder. Her Christmas present this year will have four stubby legs, white fur, and big, goofy ears. I can hardly wait to see the look on her face. I sip from my mug to hide my smile.

She steps down and moves back to survey the placement. Satisfied, she dives into the box, pulling out the next piece of our history. I watch her and my mind wanders.

We’ve been together more than fifteen years, and when I stop and think about the passage of time—the sheer speed of it as it goes by—I’m flabbergasted. Sometimes, it feels like yesterday when we met, and when I flash back, I see us as the same women we are now. It doesn’t factor into my brain that we were in our mid-twenties back then, and now we’re staring at middle-age. It’s not that we’re old, but our growing and our changing isn’t always blatantly obvious in my memories, even though I know we’ve done both.

I wonder every now and then, whenever I’m ruminating over my own relationship, why some couples stay together and others simply crumble and fall apart. I ponder it often, more so as I get older. We’re lucky, she and I. I know we are, but I don’t know why. I think about our friends, those around us who have relationships that, for one reason or another, continue to fail. When I was younger, I used to sit



in judgment, offering up all the reasons I saw why these two couldn't stay together or why those two would never make it. Now, I just sit and watch, keeping my opinions to myself, sharing them with her later. In all my years of observation, I can only come up with the one, true thing my partner and I have for each other that many couples—gay or straight—don't. It's respect. It seems so simple, but it's really quite a rare commodity. Is it so hard to speak kindly to your partner, not to belittle him or her in front of friends or acquaintances? Why do some people make it crystal clear that they think they're better than their spouse? I've heard couples get into fights at parties or gatherings and spit angry words at each other that just astound me. I've said to my better half on more than one late-night ride home, "I don't care how mad at you I get, I would *never* say that to you, especially not in front of other people. *Never, ever.*" She always agrees with me and we end up shaking our heads in bewilderment as we drive.

"Remember this one?" she asks as she pulls a ceramic, rainbow-colored icicle out of its wrapping. She'll do this the entire time. She'll ask me if I remember this ornament or that trip. She'll tell me which ones are her absolute favorites and, of course, I already know; she tells me every year. I smile and nod, more than happy to play my part in our annual script.

"Our first trip to Provincetown. Nineteen ninety-one."

She checks the year on the back of the piece, then gives me the raised-eyebrow expression of *I'm impressed*. "Very good. That was a fun time."

"You're damn right. We did nothing but have sex the whole four days."



She blushes slightly as I grin at her and waggle my eyebrows lasciviously. “I seem to recall at least a little bit of shopping,” she says by way of protest.

“Sex. All I remember is the sex.”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “Figures.”

“Damn good sex, too.”

As she climbs the stepladder again, my eyes roam her body. She’s still every bit as breathtaking as she was when we first met over a decade and a half ago, and I’m still every bit as attracted to her as I was in the beginning. She’s very conscious of taking care of herself, and she’s in the gym faithfully at least three times a week. It shows. I’ve heard muttered comments of envy when we’ve been at parties or out with friends. Her thick, auburn hair is pulled back into a ponytail today (her Weekend Project look), and when she wears it like this, it makes her look ten years younger. Though I’ve taken great pleasure in locating an occasional gray hair on her head, they are few; the deep, warm, reddish-brown is still just as rich as I remember it being that first time I ever saw her. Her expressive green eyes, though they’ve seen their share of sadness, are always sparkling with humor and kindness. The subtle laugh lines at their corners attest to that; laughter comes easily to her. And her body...God, that body...

I close my eyes as a quick memory jolts my insides—her hands blindly groping for the headboard, her back arching into me, my name seemingly torn from her throat in ragged breaths. The tangy saltiness of her on my lips, both of us sweating, grasping, moving rhythmically together in a frenzy that we haven’t felt in ages. It was last night and it



has taken center stage in my brain's Sexual Fantasy quadrant; I know it will remain there for the next several weeks. We don't have sex like we used to. Of course we don't. Who does after fifteen years together? *We're forty and we're tired*, I always say with a chuckle to myself...and sometimes to others. We get in three or four shots a month and that's good enough for both of us. It's always wonderful; it's always tender and loving. But once in a while...once in a while, we'll have a night like we did last night. My eyes roam over her backside, tucked snugly into her old, worn jeans, as she stretches to hang an ornament. I swallow hard as I'm hit with another flash of the previous night when our need for one another seemed to come out of nowhere.

It's nearly two in the morning. The moonlight spearing in through the window paints her pale skin an erotic blue as she straddles my hips. Her body is goddess beautiful, warm, her center soaking wet as she moves it against my belly. Bending my knees to support her as well as to hold her in place, I reach for her breast with one hand and slide the fingers of the other between us, between her legs. Her breasts are not small and not large and my hand cradles one perfectly. I knead it gently, and then increase the pressure, rubbing over the nipple with my thumb, enjoying the tiny gasp that escapes her lips. As the fingers of my other hand dip into her wetness, she braces herself with her hands on my knees and bends back slightly. This position is too much for me; she's the epitome of sexy. With the arching of her back, her breast pushes forward into my palm. Her throat is totally exposed to me, her hair falling back against my knees. I wish I had a painting of this moment, a way to capture it forever. She's breathtaking. I sit up suddenly, overwhelmed by my need for her. I cup the back of her head



and crush our mouths together, plunging my tongue in possessively as my fingers continue to move in the slick, creaminess of her...

“What about this one?” Her voice yanks me from my reverie and I blink at her.

“What?”

She arches an eyebrow knowingly at me; I’m sure I’m blushing. “Are you thinking something naughty?”

I chuckle at the fact that she knows me so well, and the redness of my face deepens. “I might have been having a flashback or something. Maybe.”

“From last night?”

“Could be.”

She rolls her eyes, playfully mocking me and holds up a little purple crystal that shimmers in the light of the tree. “I asked if you remembered this one.”

“Sedona. Nineteen...ninety-four?”

“Close. Ninety-three.”

She steps back up and hangs the ornament. I sip from my mug.

What do you see in me? I silently ask her. *You could have just about any woman you want, and there are many who want you. Believe me, I know. I’ve spoken to them. Why did you choose me?* It’s a train of thought on which I’ve been a passenger for many years now. It’s not self-pity or low self-esteem. I’ve examined all of that many times. I believe it’s simply a curiosity. She’s amazing, she’s lovely, she’s kind



and sweet and beautiful. And she's chosen to be with me. Out of all the possibilities, all the members of the female population from which she could have chosen, she chose me. I often wonder how it is that I came to be so lucky. I must have done something right in another life. Or, as my best friend likes to point out in his no-nonsense tone, maybe I deserve her. This thought makes me smile. Is it possible that I deserve her?

"You're doing an awful lot of grinning over there. Am I missing out on something?" Her voice is teasing. Her smile is beautiful. Her eyes sparkle, reflecting the colors from our Christmas tree.

I sigh contentedly. "No, baby. I'm just happy."

This pleases her. "Good. So am I."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"After almost sixteen years?"

"God, has it been that long?"

"In three months, yup."

"Man, we're getting old."

"That we are. By the way, you have a great ass for an old lady."

"I knew that's what you were staring at. I can feel your eyes, you know."

"Can't help myself."

"Good. I don't want you to. I want you to be checking out my ass when we're eighty. Of course, you'll have to focus a little lower by



then.”

I chuckle, and then turn serious. “How is it that I never get tired of looking at you? I never get tired of your body. I can still see you across a crowded room and want to swoop you off to the nearest bedroom.”

She smiles bashfully and shrugs and flushes yet again. I love the fact that I can still make her turn red after so many years. She unpacks another ornament, finds the perfect branch, and hangs it. She stands back and checks out the placement. Satisfied, she repeats the process. I watch for several minutes.

“What is true love?” I ask, breaking the silence.

“What?” She looks at me, cocking her head to the side like a puppy.

“I mean, how do you define true love? What does it mean to you?”

“Hmm.” She ponders this for a moment, and I can almost hear the wheels turning in her head. She takes a seat on the top step of the stepladder and rests her forearms on her knees. She focuses her green gaze on me. I love that about her. When you have a conversation with her, you get all her attention, every drop of it. “Let’s see...” She seems to be gathering her thoughts, putting them in order. “True love to me is complete compatibility. It’s the desire to be together all the time, but the security and understanding to spend time apart.” At my furrowed brow, she elaborates. “I mean, I would love nothing more than to spend all my free time with you, but I also know that we need our own space and some alone time, and I’m okay with that. It means that I’d love to



spend all day on Saturday with you by my side, but I'm fine with the fact that you want to go see that foreign film and I don't, so you go by yourself. Or that I feel like shopping and you'd rather not, so I go to the mall alone or with a friend, and you don't freak out about it.

"True love means that when I have good news, you're the one I want to share it with first. When I have a shitty day, all I want is a hug from you or a nap in your arms. When you've had a shitty day, I want to be the one to comfort you. True love means that I am always thinking of you first and me second and that's okay because I know that you're thinking of *me* first and *you* second." I'm smiling and nodding as I watch her continue. "True love is security. It's not having to worry. I don't mind when other people flirt with you. I don't even mind if you flirt back because I know where you'll be that night. I know who you're going home with, and it doesn't bother me if somebody hits on you because that simply means that other people think my wife is as hot as I do. True love is knowing exactly where I'm spending the rest of my life—here, by your side. Happily."

I blink at her, realizing with embarrassment that my eyes have welled up. I have never doubted her love for me, not once, but hearing her speak so openly about it is more touching and emotional than I was prepared to handle. I nod and sniffle. She smiles, climbs down, and heads into the kitchen. Returning, she hands me a tissue, and whispers with a grin, "You asked." I nod again as she kisses my forehead. "I love you." Then she steps back to the tree and continues with her task.

I blow my nose and dab at the happy tears on my cheeks, trying to pull myself together. How on earth I got so lucky as to end up with



her, I'll never know. Sometimes, she simply dumbfounds me.

"How about this one?" She's holding up our little plastic blueberry basket with the Christmas ribbon on the handle, gently swinging it back and forth on her finger.

"Maine. Nineteen ninety-seven."

"Very good." She winks and I melt. My heart swells.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" I ask. My voice is small and cracks slightly. I'm trying to hold it together, but the emotion is close to the surface and it's difficult to keep at bay.

She turns to me with a huge smile. Her feelings for me are plain in her eyes, on her face, as if they were scrawled right across her skin for anybody to read. My eyes fill up again. She says simply, "Yeah. I do."



Born and raised in Upstate New York, so close to the border she's practically Canadian, Georgia Beers is the eldest of five daughters and has been writing since she was old enough to hold a pen. Her fourth novel, *Fresh Tracks*, was presented with the Lambda Literary Award, as well as a Golden Crown Literary Society Award, for Best Lesbian Romance of 2006. Her sixth novel, *Finding Home*, was short-listed for a Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Romance of 2008.

After spending two years away from home, thinking they wanted to live in a warmer climate, Georgia and Bonnie, her partner of fifteen years, recently and very happily moved back north to Upstate New York where they will soon be house shopping. Georgia is currently completing a novella, which will be part of an anthology entitled *Outsiders*, to be released in the fall of 2009. Her seventh novel, *Starting from Scratch*, will be released in January, 2010. To find out more, visit www.georgiabeers.com.



In Tongues

AMY McDONALD

WE SHARE words at first. Point, English. Point, Khmer. Try and say each other's version. I repeat in English. Slowly. 'Good night.' She smiles, her teeth bright against skin and night, and tries to make her mouth conform. I find mine following, mimicking her attempt, encouraging its shape. But her words come out strangely. Vague and formless somehow. We grin then giggle.

Over the campfire she shows me how to tie my skirt so it doesn't come undone. She demonstrates with hers, pulling it loose and then: fold, fold, twist, tuck. The fabric forms a pad across her stomach and, over the smoking embers, I see she's much slimmer than I'd thought. The skin on her belly fairer than her face but downy like her cheeks.

In the kitchen she squats, flat-footed, and pulls the stomachs of fish out through their mouths. A small pile of red glistening entrails. One smooth, coaxing motion. She sings softly as she works.

I scratch at a smattering of welts across the tops of my feet.

She watches. 'Yong.'

'Yes, mosquito.'

She tips talcum powder into the palm of her hand. It smells sweet. She kneels and rubs the talc across my feet and up my calves.



She reaches under my skirt and her broad fingers pad over the insides of my thighs. 'Mosquito,' she says.

I want to tell her that she's beautiful. I want to tell her that around her I feel alive.

But we only have hot, cold, good night, fish, eat, rice, and now mosquito.

I find my breath. 'Yong.'

She fries the fish in oil and kaffir lime. Drains them. Passes me a bowl of rice and sits opposite me to eat.

I watch her ball the rice and press it against the body of the fish. She puts it deep into her mouth then raises her eyebrows.

My spoon feels heavy in my hand. She watches me lift it to my mouth and then looks at her own hand, holding another ball of rice. I want to tell her that her way is better than mine. That my spoon is awkward and out of place. But instead I raise my eyebrows and tip my chin and hope I have guessed the right meaning.

'Gin khao,' she says, the words coming from the middle of her mouth. Eat rice.

That is the difference. My words are all at the front, spilling out. I taste with the tip, just skimming the surface.

Her eyes go back to her bowl and I watch her chew.

I imagine how deeply she would have to take me in. Place me on the wide spoon of her tongue. Press me against the roof of her mouth



and squeeze me tight to taste me.

She carries a plate of the fried fish. I hold a bowl of rice. The funeral has started. It was the woman who sold flowers from baskets that hung on either side of her body. Someone found her swinging by an extension cord in her sala. Bad husband.

People sit on grass mats. Empty bottles of whiskey are lined up like caught fish.

After, we stand in the road and watch the stars. The night is chaotic: howling dogs, roosters, the bass of far-away speakers, motorbikes, wails and laughter from the funeral.

She takes my arm, turns me to face her. 'Suay,' she says and cups my jaw in her hand.

I stroke her cheek. 'Yes, beautiful.'



Punch
AMY McDONALD

‘WILL THE priest be there?’ I push earrings through stubborn holes.

Sarah’s head appears around the wardrobe door. She looks like someone else when she wears mascara. ‘Clare, it’s ex-priest. Okay? And because it’s a family thing, yes, he’ll be there.’ She says ‘he’ll’ like she’s commanding a dog. Coat hangers squeal as they are evaluated and dismissed.

Flick, flick, flick.

Sarah searches.

I hold a skirt—still attached to its special hanger—to my hips. ‘What do you think about plaid?’

No response.

‘Do you think they’ll like me?’

Sarah’s head pops back. ‘Of course. Just be yourself.’

I rummage through the top drawer for a pair of black opaque tights. My hand pushes through one leg and then the other, searching for ladders. They smell like drawer liners. I check the clock. ‘It’s almost five.’

‘Hmm,’ from the wardrobe. A discarded shirt flutters down to our bed. Tugging at her collar, she appears. Her face says ‘Well?’



I move to hold her and say ‘Perfect. You look amazing!’ Instead I pick up the gold crucifix at her neck. ‘What’s this?’

But she says, ‘Shit, Clare. Not now, Okay?’ Then she’s out the door, downstairs and collecting keys.

‘Hey!’

‘Hey yourself!’ We’ve arrived. Sarah is pushing through the front door into a hot, full family room.

‘Long time no see, stranger.’ An older man—an uncle?—pulls her into an embrace. Across the room someone says, ‘Sarah, what’s happened to all your hair?’ The man releases her and thumps her back.

She coughs. ‘Hey, Uncle Kevin.’ She holds my hand tightly and drags me across the threshold. My cheeks burn. I’m smiling but it’s forced.

At least twenty people watch with happy, curious eyes. And I know I wasn’t expected. Sarah coughs again and drops my hand. I search for something that’s nothing to look at. The tights are crawling up my legs, itching.

Uncle Kevin says, ‘So, who’s this you’ve brought?’

Sarah manoeuvres me to stand in front of her. ‘Uncle Kevin, this is Clare.’ She leaves off the second part.

We both wait for it, but instead she moves deeper into the room calling back something about drinks.

‘Well, anyway,’—the big man takes my sweating hand, pumps it



and beats my shoulder—‘good to meet you, Clare.’

‘You too.’ I smile more and bob slightly to take up less space.

Still holding my hand, Kevin says, ‘Come on, love. I’ll introduce you.’

‘Well, I told her not to bother in the end.’ Sarah’s grandmother shakes her head and clicks her tongue. Another uncle, Ollie, nods sympathetically. Stuck between them I sip warm punch. Under my skirt, sweat is running between my skin and its synthetic wrapping. I press my legs together to blot.

‘So, Clare,’—Uncle Ollie fishes a strawberry from his punch and looks to me—‘where did you and Sarah meet?’

‘At a recital in town.’ Another mouthful of punch.

‘You play?’

‘Cello.’

A break in the crowd shows Sarah bending to take a sandwich from a plate on a coffee table. She has her back to me.

‘Wonderful,’ Ollie is saying, but I’m watching Sarah’s ass, the bony curve of it showing through her trousers. It’s such a different ass to the one that was pressed warmly against my belly only hours ago. The tights tighten.

Ollie is asking, ‘So you live in town, too?’

My mouth makes a noise like it’s waiting for a tongue depressor. I focus on the bobbing cherry in my drink. ‘I live with Sarah.’ Quiet.



‘Housemates,’ he replies without a question mark.

The flush on my cheeks feels like hives.

It’s Grandma’s turn. ‘Do you have a boyfriend, too, Clare?’ She doesn’t wait for an answer, but scans the crowd. ‘Where is Sarah’s boyfriend? He sounds like such a nice fellow.’

My wrist slackens as my mouth opens. The cup tips, punch splashes over my exposed knees. I stand and splutter, ‘Where is the bathroom?’ But I turn sideways on my ankle, lurch and hit another occasional table. A cloud of peanuts rains out over the carpet.

‘Ooh, steady there.’ Kevin is back, behind me, hands on my hips, righting me like a mannequin. He spins me, winks, and says, ‘Not too sure on those heels, eh?’

Whatever I think to say comes out as empty mouthfuls of air. The flush on my cheeks spreads down my neck and out to my ears. I squat and start scavenging for the peanuts, returning them to their plastic dish.

I’m shaking.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Sarah is hissing at my ear. She pulls me to my feet and confiscates the half-refilled dish. ‘Everyone is looking at you.’

The flush spreads to my throat and breasts. It burns. I claw the skirt back down my thighs. My eyes are hot.

Sarah pushes another plastic cup of punch at me. ‘Just try to be normal, Clare. Okay?’ Pineapple bobs.

Blink.



Nod.

Blink.

Just please don't leave me here.

But she is reabsorbed into the family mass.

Sarah reaches to turn down the car radio. 'Did I tell you about St Anthony's on Wednesday? I was just lying there, on a pew, listening to the organ, and someone draped a coat over me. Must have thought I was homeless. Didn't have the heart to tell them.'

Sarah's words have worked their way through the heat of my ears. They hang like mist in the emptiness of my skull.

'Clare?' Sarah, at the wheel, glances at me.

My cheeks are deflating. The hairs on my legs, released, are righting themselves.

'Clare, are you listening to me?'

The mist solidifies and settles. 'That was him, wasn't it?'

'Who?' The lights up ahead change and Sarah eases on the brakes. She turns to me. Her face is finally my girlfriend's.

'Him. Ollie. That was your former priest uncle, right?'

'Yes, that was him.' Her last word is all exhaustion.

'So these'—I squeeze the tights—'were for him?'

The lights change and Sarah accelerates. 'Shit, Clare. Can you just drop it?'



We reach the driveway and I say it. 'None of them know, do they?'

Sarah slows and pulls into the carport. She looks straight ahead and I watch the muscles in her jaw pump. 'I love you, Clare.' As she says it she is turning her head slowly, so slowly, to face me. 'But you just don't know what they're like.'

The gold crucifix catches the light.

I remember the warm room, the laughing. I look at my lap. A drop lands on the ridiculous plaid skirt. I bat another drop away with the back of my hand. My breath, lurching, smells like ginger beer and tinned fruit cocktail.

Sarah wipes her hand over her wet face and inhales. 'I'll see you inside, okay?' she says.

As she gathers her things from the back seat I look up. 'Did you tell them your boyfriend looks like me?' I say it softly and hide the grimace that shows I know I shouldn't have said it.

'Fuck you, Clare.' She slams the car door.

The balled-up tights are wet from tears and snot. I throw them at the windscreen.

Sarah is across the garden, opening the door and turning on the lights to our house.



AMY McDONALD



Salonist Amy McDonald is a Melbourne-based writer. Her short fiction has won prizes in the Red Bubble 2007 and 2008 and the Victorian Northern Region Libraries 2007 short story competitions. She has been published in *Climate* and *Unleashed* and is a regular contributor to *samesame.com* and *LOTL* magazine. One half of the Raw Rose and Chocolate writing duo, Amy has co-written three editions of the zine *Miranda*. Her new solo zine, *In My Own Room*, was launched in January. When Amy isn't writing, she divides her time between yoga, her dog Orlando and riding first class on the unrequited love train. Website: www.amymcdonald.com.au



Doesn't She Ever Stop Talking

JOAN NESTLE

(With a nod to Jesse B. Semple and
his creator, Langston Hughes)

1. Her Death Was Not Unexpected

HER DEATH was not unexpected, but the weather was. A blustery wind sneaking in under the heat, bending the silver gums almost to their knees. She had been lying up in her little bedroom for several weeks, books piled all around her as if they were her family come to say good-bye—all kinds, all the sorts of books that had befriended her during her wayward life—a life of Robert Browning, a novel by a Turkish writer, an Australian detective story, a thick collection of poetry, a book about drawing with colored pencils, the story of Sydney's dance halls and picture palaces, a four generational history of a Vietnamese family, a journal of queer thinking. Glasses of water had to find their balance on these stacks, pills and tissues slipped into the crevices between these edifices of The Word. That was where she was going, she used to say—into the great Black Word, not the word that was in the beginning, whatever that might have been long ago in some old man's tyrannical mind, but maybe the Word in the middle of a dirty joke or in a garbled dream or best of all, a Word sung by Ethel Waters when she wasn't allowed to be magnificent on the white stage—that was where she was going.

We didn't think she missed her family, never having had much of one; in a way, she lived without family or nation, the two anchors of Vietnamese life, she told us one particularly difficult day.



“Unanchored” was how she put it, not devoid of loyalties, but just not the usual kind—not to gods or anthems or sports teams or free enterprise which so often, she said, was neither free nor particularly enterprising, unless you call having old Harvard chums in high places acts of the economic imagination.

In some ways our friend seemed most alive in her last days. She was preoccupied with shadows and they carried a hefty weight. In fact, one night as we sat in her small living room sipping Mountain Gay Rum and tea, we overheard bits of her ongoing conversation with one David Brooks, a New York columnist with a boyish grin, who must have been appearing nightly right above her bed, not on his wishes it would seem, because she spent a good fifteen minutes reassuring him that his time in her bedroom would be short and he would soon return to his son, baseball, and friends at West Point who could always make him feel good about war. How she conjured up this unlikely apparition we had no idea—our friend was steadfastly closed to spiritual endeavors and just the smell of lavender or apricot-scented candles was enough to slam her door. She did enjoy delightful contradictions, and he shining down from her bedroom ceiling, loaded as he was with phobias about the chattering classes, women going down on each other, and “really radical people” at peace marches, must have been a seductive diversion from dying. That was our friend—conjuring up ghosts so she could see right through them.

Another visitor she entertained quite regularly, or thought she did, was Ethel Merman. “Ethel,” we heard her say one very hot morning, “you’re not even Jewish.” But what they really wanted to talk about was girdles, the old-fashioned kind that rubberized your whole



body. “That was the real secret of that voice,” we heard our friend say. “That never ending O that brought down the fake stars in the Lowe’s on Jerome Avenue was forced out of your mouth by body made into stone, one unbroken column of flesh, flesh made stone.”

“Yep, that was me,” said Ethel.

Sometimes Ethel Merman made our friend cry—not in sadness but in longing for a sound. And then they would talk about women, their language growing fouler and fouler with each tit for tat. Our friend loved to regale us, when she was in this world, with stories from the golden days of lesbian gossip—like the night Ethel almost bit off Tallulah’s nipple in a fit of drunken grand passion that ended up in the Bellevue emergency room. Ethel, we were told, swore like the sailor she was. It was at times like these, when there’s no business like show business or the business of war was being touted in the sick room, that the little black dog with his impenetrable black eyes would throw his ruffled head back and howl like a fog horn, a small black beacon for wayward ships and dreams.

Our pal was not dying alone literally. We were there, a motley collection of old and new friends; librarians waiting to take back overdue books; old lovers and lovers of the old; the woman from down the street who had shared her collection of the Harmonics, delighting in the tuneful way Jews could sing a cappella before being shipped off to unknown destinations; and most of all, right outside her door sat the little dog, day and night, sometimes licking our hands, sometimes snapping at our fingers—don’t worry, she would say, he never draws blood. And then of course, no one really dies alone; billions of people are dying all at the same time all over the world, an endless stream



passing from one dimension to another. Every day she lived our friend wondered at those who had been standing on the wrong side of the street in Baghdad—was there a right one, she said out loud, outside the green zone, and why *the green zone*, green for grass or money or go ahead and was the rest *the red zone*, for blood, for stop now? Accidents of fate some called it, but our friend refused such dismissals—she could not work out how starvation or untreated disease or war or exile from enough could be called accidents when so many seemed involved in making it all happen. She never accepted the belief that history was an accident. In fact one of her favorite sayings towards the end was a loud “That Was No Accident” shouted with her old Bronx verve. It sounded a lot like “You’re Out!”

Besides, our friend always knew dying was part of life; she didn’t belong to a community of faith—our friend. And that was good because we didn’t have to either and if we did, it didn’t enter into the equation. Like Einstein said. When he wasn’t being the Jewish genius. In fact our friend over the 68 years of her life had been dying for a long time. She never took a trip without calling one of us to say good-bye—and she didn’t mean a little good-bye, she meant the whole shebang. We all had stock phrases like “you will be home before you know it” or “you know, they have doctors there too.” She left her latest last will and testament tucked into her chest of drawers—she loved that phrase, how it conjured up breasts and cunt all in one image of storage—or under her pillow or between the pages of one of those precariously balanced books. We imagine once we have to empty her rooms, we will find endless goodbyes and notices of who gets what—not that there is a lot of what, but there are the books and, of course, that little dog, the



sentinel of her dreams. Maybe we could even say for our friend dying was her life—and boy, did she kick up her heels the whole way.

How do you say good-bye to a ghost in these days when so many apparitions are on the scene? But this one was special, she was our friend. Maybe all ghosts have friends who think they are real, that blood flows in those shattered veins, that nights should bring pillows for tired heads and not concrete floors or armored vehicles. Sorry to slip into diatribe, one of the dangers of our times, the rich baroque language of ghosts, but our friend used to say, don't worry about being over the top, they don't allow it for long anyway. She was a good bottom, she was, that woman lying in there, always had her best conversations looking up at the ceiling.

We shifted in our seats, feeling the wind about our ankles, the little dog curling up in front of the bedroom door. The poet among us spoke Browning, something about “the dangerous edge of things.”

2. There She Goes Again

“There she goes again, dreaming of better days,” says the gray-haired, gray-eyed Midwesterner sitting in the corner. “I would know that moan anywhere, and this time, it sure ain't pain. Oh, she sure did like her woman poppas.” Again the moan and this time the little dog rolled over and spread his legs. “Nothing to show off there,” the school teacher cracked. The night was long and our knees ached. We needed this change of subject. The tennis player from the back of the room contributed, “What she most loved was a good forearm.” A few of us laughed fondly. “Yep, it was the promise of all that thrust, she sure did



love that thrust.”

“You’re making her sound like Cape Canaveral,” said the historian sitting next to our friend’s bust of Eleanor Roosevelt.

Then the redhead twanged, “You know I come from a timber mill family; for three generations we have hewn and stacked slabs of Antipodean hardwoods, our hands calloused and our noses large. That was what she saw in my arms, I believe, my veins made large by hauling big ideas around. The thrust of big ideas, I wore them on every knuckle and she took them all in.”

“Thrust is an interesting thing in a woman,” said the Midwesterner. Like our friend, we were a mixed bag, geographically speaking. “I remember the afternoon she watched me whip up an angel food cake, my arm bulging with the effort of making froth hard; she was sighing with every whip, worrying, I found out later, that there would be nothing left for her.” And as we knew she would, the Midwesterner laughed low and with a charming kind of Kansas modesty, said, “Of course, she had nothing to worry about.” Thrusting, our friend always said, is a two-way street.

A good thirty of us were packed into that small room, listening for changes in breathing, lapses in dreams. And here we were, filling in the hours with our own special mementos of desired intrusions.

Late into the night we told our stories, cave painters all, our hands dipped in our vocations—printers’ hands, old fashioned bookkeepers’ hands rough with ink-stained calluses, peach-smeared child-carer hands, carpenters’ hands with nails bitten low because that is how we had all learned to do it. Horse riders’ hands, poets’ hands,



pausing to shape sound from the air, and at the end, one of the oldest friends though not around much anymore, told of her soldier's hands, on a week-end leave back in the early 60s, fleeing into our friend. "Oh did she grip me, the best AWOL I ever had. I remember it like it was yesterday, or maybe tomorrow, another war, but the same pull between one intrusion and another—how I wanted to stay, one hand buried in that warm place, my dog tags bouncing on her breasts, she whispering freedoms in my ear, but I had to go. She, in there, knew the difference between one kind of invasion and another." Our heads nodded in the darkness, no oil wells in there, no prisons or medals or god's will, no lands to own, no people to subjugate, no axes to grind, no profits, no nations wanting the world's all without giving anything back, no gated communities or walled-in territories, no manifest destinies— "Wait, stop, it's just our friend's sexual pleasures we are talking about, not the United Nations, all you needed was her open door policy and a little thrust."

As we took in this call to reason, we noticed that the little black dog had left its usual position and now stood on the threshold of our gathering. "Hey look at that—he's got something for us." Knowing our fear of him, he dropped the small tooth-marked piece of paper at the foot of the most patient of us. "It's from her," she said in a hushed voice. "I can die without god, but I can't live without Marx," she read out. Well, there you go. She sure is going to need a lot of thrust to get where she is going.



3. Among Us Was

Among us was a fat older woman who had flown in just for our vigil, not knowing whether she would arrive before or after our friend's departure, but we quickly reassured her that even we who had been gathered for many months now were never sure what was happening in that small bedroom. We had to do a lot of shifting to make room for her large body which smelt of pepper trees and corn. The little dog made himself even smaller as she carefully stepped over him, after putting her ear to her friend's door and calling out, "No worries, doll, I made it." Satisfied with her new position among us, she took out a small embroidery from her ever-present travel sack, pushed her needle through, straight and true. After a few minutes of tight stitching, the new-comer looked up, smiled at the leather-clad bookkeeper sitting to her left and, exhaling a soft, red-desert-warmed breeze, settled in for the duration.

"Where do you think our friend is residing tonight—which world is she in, she's been so quiet, no messages, no thumps and the TV is almost dumb." We all turned to the closed door, bounded as ever by that cheeky dog who had never warmed up to us. "Looks to me as if he is guarding the border," said the fat woman, never missing a stitch.

Ever watchful for a new subject to while away the hours, we turned to her. "And what do you know about borders," gently questioned her next seat neighbor. We knew when to be careful with our free floating inquiries; borders were nothing to fool with, not now, maybe not ever, except—and here the questioner inclined her head in the direction of the now silent bedroom. "Well, circumstance, you know



Circumstance, can be anything from a bill collector to a love affair to a government's certainty to a tank coming through your bedroom window, Circumstance causing all kinds of changes in a person's life, changes that can just pick you up from all you know and deposit you right smack down in some other god-forsaken place." Here we kept our mouths shut; we didn't want her to know that where she was sitting was literally a place that had forsaken god.

The bus driver among us, still dressed in her blues and whites, passed around a bowl of cherries and Fannie, as the Circumstance lady came to be known, delicately took a handful, putting down on her ample lap her piece of linen with its carefully emerging cross-stitched green and red grevilleas. "Now I have had to learn to live with borders, learn how to twist and turn so one place wouldn't send me back to another place. I'm so used to it now that I can occupy two places at the same time. But no place—and all its brothers—could keep me from being here. You just keep an eye on me as the night goes by and if you see me fade a little, don't worry, I'm just stepping over the border to my other place. I got to keep my hand in, you know, got to stay in touch with that other sky, with that other light, got to keep the officials on their toes, trying to catch a fat lady slipping through procedures. You know, when I am there, over the years, I have actually in my own way, walked through a wall and found myself on old Broadway—yep, I'm an old song and dance girl. Borders, particularly borders with histories, are sad miserable misconceptions, not attuned to the Circumstances of Life, if you know what I mean."

At that point, the soldier who had sat among us for as long as she could rose to leave. "You tell my friend in there to give it a good



fight—let me know what happens, will you,” she said to the most patient of us. “You can find me at the nearest border, I’m on twilight patrol. She knew me before I was a soldier and those kinds of buddies are hard to come by. Sorry I didn’t get to tell you some of the things we did in the old Village, me with my rookie ways and shined-to-a-star boots under her day bed that never rose off the floor. I took her home with me one afternoon back to my Bronx, not hers, mine, the Italian Bronx—wanted her to meet my mom and dad and my messed up brother, see the house I had grown up in. My mother thought I was bringing home my wife. That’s the kind of daughter I was. Well, nice meeting you all—I know what you mean about borders and guns and permissions to cross over—dangerous territory, that. At least I got my education, now I’m a nurse who can carry a rifle—that’s the kind of thing that happens at borders. Thanks for the old unguarded days.” She nodded to the bedroom and before we could stop her, she bent over to take leave of the dog. Our warning words died on our lips as that nasty fervent fellow just lifted his muzzle, now a little gray, and gave her a good look—no teeth, no snarl, just a good deep look out of those black eyes. Fannie sighed and something shifted in the room.



JOAN NESTLE



My roots lie in the butch-fem communities of the working class NYC Greenwich village bars of the 1950s—all the rest is the flood of life. After publishing nine books the old fashioned way, I am pleased to have this opportunity in a new time. Author of *A Restricted Country* and *A Fragile Union*, both in new Cleis editions; editor of *The Persistent Desire: A Fem-Butch Reader* and most recently, co-editor of *GenderQueer: Beyond the Binary*. Co-founder of The Lesbian Herstory Archives, now in Brooklyn. For more tales of life, visit Joannestle.com. I have also attached a photo taken in the back yard, my first, of our home in Melbourne, Australia.



Wired NATASHA CARTHEW

She's got you wired
up to your eyeballs
your head dings with light-bulbs
sparking incoherencies
your mouth all of a buzz.

She's got you hot under the collar
the cold sweat threatens to short fuse
you shake with the thought
the memory of tiny explosions.

She's got you plugged in
her way of thinking
she rings and you jump
her every word cuts your blood circuit
weak at the knees.

She's got you so where she wants you
switches you on and off with a look
and you're so going to miss her
a flaying cable
she's got you wired
and severed
when she leaves you.

Stigma

NATASHA CARTHEW



From afar
she stands a calico altar
brooding arches
she poses
makes a beautiful broken tower.

From afar
her stigmata wounds flash tattoo
vermillion and crimson stains
inked veins bursting bubbling blue.

From afar
she chimes out a detailed toll
ringing in the daybreak
through cracks
flashing through armoured walls.

From afar
she is incredible grace
catching sight of her soulful face
the spirit moves
but up close
she lives a grey and empty place.



Cabin Fever

NATASHA CARTHEW

She's the one with the forked tongue
licking liver
raw and as red as the blood on her hands
making you come
hot and heavy with the push of things
holding you down.

She's the mystery girl down deep in the woods
river watching
waiting for the next face to sail her way
burning bridges as the temperature rises
you will not leave this place alive.

She's the wet wind smoking roof bound
sky-high
turning you round
chaining you to a dark cave
eternally yours
underground.

She's the fire in the belly
pulling to your knees
salt water lover
stranger
she feeds shackled to your heart
branding you as hers
so you will never leave.



Natasha Carthew is a young lesbian writer from Cornwall in the UK. She has been published in numerous national and international magazines, has won awards for poetry and has had three books of poetry published; her latest book *Flash Reckless* was published by the internationally acclaimed lesbian/feminist publisher Onlywomen Press.

Natasha lives in the country with her partner, where she is currently working on a new body of country poetry.

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Sweet Afters

The Team

Sweet Afters: Read These Lips, Volume 3 is brought to you by:

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Evecho prefers cross-genre fiction and contemporary non-fiction in her daily reading. In her downtime, she trips across the internet for lesbian news and lesbian literature, and events that affect LGBTQs. She believes the future is bright for queer girls exploring expression in all media and wants to see more of them. Evecho, in her RL persona, has been involved in local, regional and international LGBTQ events for over fifteen years. You may contact her at editor@readtheselips.com

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In her former work life, Linda Lorenzo was variously a high school English teacher and department chairman, a teaching associate at Brown University, and adjunct faculty teaching the much maligned freshman writing course at the University of Rhode Island. Her current work is all about lesbian fiction. In addition to serving as editor for *Read These Lips*, she is a freelance editor of lesbian novels, poetry, short stories, and erotica. She also has had her own work published in *Read These Lips: Openings* and in *Fantasy: Untrue Stories of Lesbian Passion* (Bella). Linda's email is proofdr@readtheselips.com

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Renée loves copy editing stories and compiling bibliographies for RTL, mostly because RTL is a wonderful project, but also because both activities appeal to her making-order-out-of-chaos Virgo personality. Not that the stories we get at RTL are ever chaotic... She also enjoys translating and writing stories, some of which have been published in the anthologies *Read These Lips* (Volume1), *Fantasy* (Bella), *Best Lesbian Love Stories: Summer Flings* (Alyson), the *Erotic Interludes* series (Bold Strokes); *Toe to Toe* and *Khimairal Ink* (Bedazzled), and *Girl Crazy* (Cleis). Feedback is welcome at bibliographer@readtheselips.com

Ann Dunan, Designer

Ann can more regularly be found in the scene shop of a theatre creating many of the visual elements for live entertainment or business productions. Not a writer but an avid reader, Ann is an accomplished artist, designer, carpenter, props builder, sculptor, but a downright crummy seamstress. She is happiest backstage in the sawdust, paint and darkness.

Ann lives in Florida which, about half the time, isn't all that dark. She invites you to click on the pink dot and can be contacted at design@readtheselips.com

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